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Ward, Neil oral history interview

Mariah Pfeiffer

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Interview with Neil Ward by Mariah Pfeiffer

Interviewee

Ward, Neil

Interviewer

Pfeiffer, Mariah

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Place

Lewiston, Maine

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Biographical Note

Neil Ward's grandfather owned a pick-your-own strawberry farm in Durham and his father worked in Auburn's shoe factories. Ward was born in 1960 and grew up at Allen Pond in Greene, Maine. After graduating from high school, Ward worked briefly in the Bates Mill in Lewiston and then in shoe factories in Auburn until they closed in the 1980s. When the shoe factories closed, Ward worked at Maine Egg Farms, took a job surveying land for a number of years, and then went to Unity College. There, he earned a bachelor's degree in environmental policy. He and his wife scraped by to finance his education, and to finance hers as well. With his degree, Ward worked for a number of years in Augusta in environmental consulting, but then left as his company was downsizing. He stayed at home to raise the family's young son, and took on part-time work with what would become the Androscoggin River Alliance, where he continues now.

Scope and Content Note

This interview covers biographical information about the Wards family; life at Allen Pond: summer camps, residential development, playing as kids; Ward's experience at Unity College; working in industry: Ward's experience, his family's experience; Ward's relationship with his father; Ward's interest in environmental policy; Ward's work in environmental consulting; being a stay-at-home dad; the Androscoggin River Alliance: getting involved, Ward's various responsibilities, internal politics, jobs versus the environment issues, and development issues; the meaning of the Androscoggin River:

pollution, realizing the River could be beautiful, remembering the river, Ward's commitment to the river; and Ward's vision for the river's future.

ANDROSCOGGIN RIVER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Q: So, let's just start with where were you born, when, and by whom.

A: By whom? You mean my parents?

Q: Yes.

A: How far back do you want me to go with parental stuff?

Q: Generational, you mean? As far as you feel is necessary. From what ethnic background are you?

A: Both sides of my family tree comes from England. We just found out that my mom's side, we just received a family tree sort of thing from someone who is doing genealogy and it dates back to 1676 coming over here.

Q: And since then you've lived in the same area, the family?

A: Yes, always really within the Androscoggin Valley.

Q: And so the farthest back generation that you remember?

A: I remember my great grandmother and grandfather on my mother's side, and also on my dad's side. I don't know if we all came young or how that happened, or if we just live forever. I'm not sure how that happened. I remember as a little boy going to Christmas at my great grandparents' house in Durham, right beside the river, and I still have a couple of ornaments that they have given me and that sort of stuff.

Q: Do you know why they chose to settle and stay in the area?

A: On my dad's side they were farmers, and I guess you could say that on my mom's side too, although they were far less successful on my mom's side.

Q: What kind of farming?

A: My great grandfather had a pick-your-own strawberry farm. That's what I remember. I'm sure he did other things years beyond, but that's what I remember, that he had a pick-your-own strawberry farm.

Q: And then your parents lived right in Leeds as well?

A: I grew up right at Allen Pond in Greene. I was born right here in Lewiston, CMMC, on April first, April Fool's Day, 1960, and my dad still lives there, at Allen Pond.

Q: What kind of things do you remember from growing up over by Allen Pond? And this doesn't necessarily have to do with the river specifically, but what was the area like back then?

A: Well, it was very different than it is today. You know, it has a direct relationship with the river, because its outlet flows directly into the river several miles downstream. When I grew up there, we were the only people that lived there year round. There's really not that many new places there. There are a few mansions, but not many. But now what we always considered camps have all been converted. Well, not all, but a lot of them have been converted to year-round homes, so it's really changed the atmosphere. When I grew up, from June to September it was like a Lewiston-Auburn suburb. Everybody from Lewiston-Auburn had their camps, and they would go out to the lake and spend the summer there and their parents commuted in to work. Then the rest of the year my brother, my sister and I, and my two younger brothers later on, had thousands and thousands and thousands of acres to roam around on, and it was grand.

Q: Were there a lot of kids during the non summer months?

A: No, our nearest neighbor in the non summer months was about three miles away, and there were a couple of kids that were older than me anyways. The youngest

one I think was in my oldest brother's class in school, so I knew who they were but they were too old for me.

Q: Little pipsqueak.

A: Yeah, so I had to get along with my older brother and sister in order to have someone to play with.

Q: What kind of things did you and your brother and sister do?

A: Well of course, all summer long we swam from seven in the morning until seven at night. We loved the lake. And then in the fall of course you had to have your acorn fights and that sort of stuff, and we had all kinds of forts all through the woods because we had thousands of acres to play on. And we loved to go sledding all winter because we were the only people who lived there. Vermont Avenue is actually the street, but it's just a camp road and it's very steep and goes down to the lake. So my dad would plow and that was our sliding hill. We would slide from Allen Pond all the way down to the lake, which must be about a quarter of a mile.

Q: Does the lake freeze up there?

A: Oh yes.

Q: So you can slide right down there.

A: So you can slide right out onto the lake, absolutely. And in the wintertime, particularly in the fall when the ice would freeze over and there wasn't snow, we of course would go skating out on the lake and those sort of things.

Q: So when did you start noticing the change from camp to more permanent housing?

A: There was only one or two that had converted by the time I left. It's really been a fairly recent phenomenon, probably within the last two decades, that they've been converting rapidly. And I believe the state actually put a moratorium on it because there was so many conversions. It's a fairly small lake. It just can't handle the pressures from year-round residents, so I understand that it's very difficult to convert now.

Q: Interesting. And when you said that you left, what does that mean? You went to college at this point?

A: No, no, I didn't go to college, God no. I didn't go to college until '96. I was a nontraditional student. After high school I went, like everyone else around here – because college was not something that was really pushed in our school system. It's a

very rural school system. It was get them up there and get them to work. So that's what I did, I went to work. And I worked at Bates Mill for a while, I worked in a number of shoe shops. Generally the shoe shops, you worked there.

My generation was really like kind of the forgotten generation, because we weren't pushed to go to school and do better than our parents. We were left with whatever they had created for employment, and that was basically shoe shops and textile mills. Well, by the time my generation got out of school those were really dwindling substantially. The textile mills were virtually gone. And even the shoe shops, you could get jobs but you rarely got a decent job, because those decent jobs were filled with older people who had been there for years and there was no way they were giving those jobs up. So you got whatever was left for the taking. But basically you'd work there until the place closed, and then you'd go to the next shoe shop and work there until they closed. And it got to the point where there was nothing left. There was nothing left in Lewiston-Auburn. I said, well, I can't do anything.

I had been doing some land surveying for a number of years, and I had gone as far as I could go in that field without having a degree. So I said well, it's time to go back to school and get a degree. And I thought I was going to go back and get a degree in surveying, and then I decided that really wasn't the field. Because I had worked in that field for about ten years, but that's a boom and bust industry in the state of Maine, and there was a lot more bust than boom. So I said, you know, I don't want to do that, I've

had enough of that. I want something that I can get a steady job in, don't have to worry about employment, that sort of thing. So I went back to school, got a degree in environmental policy.

Q: Taking a step back, what kind of things would you do in the shoe shops and in the Bates Mill you said you worked at.

A: Oh, I worked at Bates Mill very, very briefly, about four days I think it was. They put me in I think it was called the carding room first, and I basically took this big wheeled bin around with wooden spools in it to different people that were putting them on machines. And then this person quit that worked in this God awful place on the third floor at Bates Mill. Fourth floor actually I think it was, depending upon which way you went in. So they had to have someone fill this person's place, so they said oh, that's you. You're the newest in, you get to have this job. Well lucky me.

It was on the fourth floor. I was the only person that worked on the fourth floor, and I wheeled these huge six foot by four foot by five foot bales of cotton, it was very compressed, it was very heavy, over to this machine. I had to cut the straps off the bales and kind of break the cotton up a little bit and throw it into this machine that ripped it into shreds, and it went through tubes down to other departments in the mill. Well, I did that for a couple of nights and then, like the third night it dawned on me, you know, if something happened to me up here, the only way they're going to know is when the red

cotton starts showing up. And I said, you know, this job just isn't worth that, so I quit that job.

In the shoe shops I did a number of different things. In women's shoes, in one shop, I stamped the little labels that you see inside the shoes on the little puffy cushion part. I mean, there was nothing that wasn't just a mindless job. You were part of the machine. It's not a vocation, by any stretch of the imagination.

I did molding for a while, which I actually molded the soles onto the bottom of sneakers, tennis sneakers. I did cotton sneakers or mesh sneakers for a while. And what you did was, you ran I believe eight machines, and they were all like two hundred and forty degrees apiece, and it was like two cast feet and you put the sneaker on it, like it was you putting your own shoe on. Then you would fill the mold with this rubber material and flip the foot around and sink it down in. And then you would take the one you had just made off the top one, put another up on there and get ready for the next cycle.

But even in the wintertime that job, I did that for a couple of years but January, when it was freezing cold outside, you would walk in and within minutes you would hear your sweat sizzling on the machine because it was just so hot. And I also did the same sort of thing on leather sneakers, leather tennis shoes. Very top of the line tennis shoes that cost a lot of money. But because they had like a finish on the leather, you had to grind that finish off so the sole would bond to the leather. What you did was take a big brush

that was – you know, I swear I'm half deaf today because of that – it was an air gun that had this big bristled brush on the end of it and you would grind it around the edge, and that's what would allow the rubber to adhere to it. And the whole time you were doing that, all these little wires would come flying off that brush and stick into you. You know, you'd come home and you'd find them stuck in your clothes and into your arms. But you did what you had to do. You have to eat, right? So you did it.

Let's see, I also worked at Maine Egg Farms for a while. That was right out of high school. I did a lot of different things there too. I think the worst job I had was what they called pulling chickens, and that was exactly what the name sounds like. There's like twelve chickens in this little cage and they're there until they stop laying eggs. Then they're no good to the egg plant anymore, so you have to pull them out of that cage through a little hole and put them in a truck, and they truck them to Campbell Soup or wherever they're going. And the chickens of course are not happy because they're getting pulled out of that cage.

You've got, you know, six chickens in each hand by one leg apiece. They're flapping their wings, pecking at you. Just not a good job. I worked inside the egg processing plant for a while too. That wasn't nearly as bad as working with the chickens themselves. I did everything in there from actually packing them into their little cartons – you know, it was all mechanically done but running the machine that did that. Also did another thing called candling, which actually runs through this machine in this dark room, and there are these lights underneath the eggs and you can actually see into the

eggs and then you could see if there is something in the egg. Then you'd remove the bad ones and that sort of stuff. But there was very little employment opportunity around, so you had to do what you had to do.

Q: Did most of the people from your high school class stay in the area and do that similar kind of thing, do you think?

A: A lot of us probably did. You know, I still run into people at the store or whatever, and they're still working at some God awful job somewhere. So yeah, probably. I mean, this is a guess because I really don't know, but I would say probably seventy to seventy-five percent of the people did.

Q: And how soon after you stopped working at the mills did it, when exactly did the mill shut down, do you know? I'm not sure.

A: I would say that the mill shut down probably completely in the late eighties, but even, like I said, when I got out of high school it was much less than it had been. There had already been several mills that had left. The Libby Mill, which is across Main Street from Bates Mill, they had closed. Now I think most of that mill has been burnt and gone. And there was another mill that I forget the name of it, but that burnt when I was probably like ten years old. That was right close to the Longley Bridge, where there's a

little park now. There was a mill building there, but that burnt, like I said, when I was a little kid.

Q: I'm forgetting now, did you say that your father was working in agriculture?

A: No, my father actually worked in the shoe shops. He worked in the shoe shops. He worked in, I forget the name of it, but he worked in this shoe shop. He actually molded the counters that make the heel of the shoe stiff. Very tough job. He stood at one machine. You have to stand there because there are multiple things that are going on at the same time. Part you run by your foot, part you run by your hand. And he stood at that machine for – that same machine – I remember going and visiting him at a certain window right behind his machine, probably seventeen or eighteen years. I know he had been sticking money into retirement, sort of a 401, because there were 401s, all that time. He was a very hard worker, very frugal and a Yankee all the way, and he stuck money away.

Now I remember he was very upset because right out of the blue the place closed and he was like a year and a half from being a hundred percent vested, so he only got pennies on the dollar from what he had invested. I remember him just irate, just screaming about it. He got literally pennies, not over ten cents on the dollar, of what he was supposed to have gotten. And then he was one of the only people in the Lewiston-Auburn area that did that job, so that there was another company that was kind of

moving in at the same that was owned by a Canadian firm or Canadian corporation. So they came to him and offered the same job to him, and he worked there until he retired about five years ago, doing the same thing.

So really he did that for about thirty years, working standing in one place for thirty years. He made good money doing it because he was very good at it. It was a piecework job and so that's what he did. My mom did all kinds of different kinds of things. She worked at Maine Egg Farms. She did nurses aide sort of stuff. She worked at the hospital for a while, waitressing, all different sort of jobs.

Q: And your brothers and sisters?

A: I have two brothers now that work at the box plant that International Paper owns in Auburn. I have a sister who has a degree in social work, and she's going back and getting her master's in, boy I should know this, administration I think. Then I have one brother who has worked his entire working life at Bourque's Market in Lewiston and he's like the manager of Bourque's Market. That's all he's ever done. He started there in high school and never left.

Q: So they're all in the area?

A: Yes, all of my siblings are all within like ten miles.

Q: Do you get to see each other a lot now?

A: Not as much as we'd like, of course. I mean, you know, we all have busy lives and so forth. But on all the holidays we manage to get together at some point, you know, that sort of stuff. Christmas and Thanksgiving of course, we rotate through the families because we're all so close. Every other year we have Christmas at my house, and then the next year we'll have Thanksgiving at my house and that sort of thing. So we manage to stay pretty close.

Q: Tell me a little more about college and beyond. I mean, I guess you went to Unity?

A: I did, I went to Unity. That was tough doing, just committing to it. You know, it had been like twenty years since I'd been in school. Scary to give up your job and paycheck to go to school. Created a lot of friction in the family actually, because it's like the work ethic of my dad and the whole Yankee thing. What do you mean you're giving up your job to go to school? How are you going to pay your bills, how are you going to eat, that sort of stuff. And I still don't think he's gotten over that. I'm not sure if it's that I did that or that I have a degree now, that he might think I think I'm better than he is because I have a college degree, that sort of thing. I'm not sure. But there is some friction that was created by doing that.

But boy, it was tough. I remember my first semester, because it's a nontraditional, they base financial aid on the previous year's income. Well, the previous year you were working. Well now, all of a sudden you're not working and you have all of these extra bills, you know. So it was very tough. I managed to buy one book that semester. Most of my professors were understanding and would put the textbooks on reserve for me in the library, but I had a couple of professors that just said you just got to buy them. It was like, do I buy these books or do we pay our mortgage and heat, because then I already had a mortgage and I couldn't give that up, I couldn't give up my house. So that was tough to do. I'm very glad I did, but there was twelve nontraditional students that went in the same class I did. I was the only one that made it all the way through.

Q: Wow, congratulations.

A: Thanks. The rest of them, for family reasons, just couldn't do it. One of them did manage to stay long enough to get an associate's degree, so there was like one and a half successes. So it was tough.

Q: Is that a common financial aid practice for nontraditional students?

A: As far as I know, that's the only one. And that's why I've been so involved in trying to raise money for nontraditionals, because I remember. I commuted back and forth to school, which was seventy miles one way, and I wondered some days, boy, do I have enough gas to get home. I remember one day something happened to my transmission. I don't know if you know where Unity is?

Q: Yeah, I do actually.

A: It's out in the middle of nowhere, and halfway home my truck broke down and I needed transmission fluid. It blew a hose on the transmission. I'm like probably fifteen to twenty miles from the nearest store. Luckily, this guy that lived not far from where I broke down said, I think I have like a half a quart I can give you, so that's all I can do for you. I said that might get me to the store. And I got to the store, and then I thought to myself, okay, how are you going to buy a quart of transmission fluid? So you know, I had like two dollars in my pocket and it was two dollars and seventy cents. I managed. I had like two bottles that I cashed in and I managed to find enough change and I actually got home, but it was interesting.

And my wife, we put each other through school. She grew up not far from me too and went to the same school system that I did, and her folks had a grow-your-own farm, didn't come from a lot of money. The family in Massachusetts where her grandparents grew up, that part of the family had lots of money but it didn't come to Leeds, Maine.

She had applied right out of high school to go to college, but for some reason didn't go. And then we met. I actually didn't even know her in high school. I knew her older sister but not her.

We met and just clicked, and we got married three years after we started going together, and we put each other through school. She went first. She's always been in nursing, started out as a nurses aide. Went to Central Maine Technical College to get her LPN, and she actually finished getting her bachelor's the semester after I got my bachelor's at USM, so we basically put each other through school.

Q: And she was going sooner than you. What year did she go?

A: From college?

Q: She didn't go right into college?

A: No, she did not, no. I would say it was like '85 or '86 that she got her LPN.

Q: And you were in '96?

A: Yes, I went in '96.

Q: How did you choose Unity?

A: Because of my background in land surveying, I had applied for a program they had there in land use planning. I had been volunteering on the local municipal land use planning board. I was the chairman of the comprehensive plan committee, that sort of stuff, and it interested me, so I said well, that's what I want to do. So I applied for it, got accepted, and then about three months before I was supposed to start school I got a letter from them saying we no longer have this program.

And then the professor who ran that department called me up and said, you just got this letter, don't panic. What we've done is we've broadened it. This is now environmental policy versus. land use planning. You're going to fit in very well here. You know, the things that we have incorporated into it. And so I said well, I've been accepted. Never been accepted to a college before. They were willing to take a chance on me, I'll take a chance on them. And just loved the place, never looked back.

Q: What were your favorite things about the environmental policy program? Or what sparked your interest the most?

A: The political science end of things. I've loved politics since I was a little boy. I remember sitting and watching TV, watching the Watergate hearings and then watching

Nixon resign. I just have loved politics since I was a little boy. Some sort of weird quirky thing, but I just loved it. So I really liked the political science end of it.

Q: And was that sort of policy making, or what is the political science?

A: Well, I would say it's policy-making and implementation. You know, you can make the policy but until it gets implemented and you get the screaming people, you know, the mad screaming people hollering at you, it's not a true policy.

Q: And then from there, did you go right into the Androscoggin River Land things?

A: No. I worked at E/PRO Environmental Consulting, engineering and environmental consulting in Augusta. At Unity you have to do X amount of volunteer hours and you have to do at least one internship, and I interned with E/PRO for summer, actually doing water sampling on the Androscoggin. And then the next year they offered me the same summer job, third year they did the same thing, and when I got out they said, you know, that last summer, they said ,you got a job waiting when you graduate. So that was very sweet, you know.

So I worked with them for three years after I got out of school, but it was part of Central Maine Power. It was this corporate mentality that I just didn't fit into. I was actually getting ready to leave and they downsized the department that I was in and said we're

going to have to lay you off. I said, this worked out good, I actually did all right. And just before that my son had been born, and I went home and told my wife. She knew I was pretty unhappy working there and she knew I was going to starting working for something else, and I came home and said I got laid off today. And we thought about it for about a day and she said, why don't you just stay home and take care of Ambrose, because we're paying X amount of dollars to have him taken care of anyways. It doesn't make sense to have you go outside of home to get a job to pay someone else to take care of our son. I said well, I was a pretty new father and I said, I'll give it a shot, but I don't know. I did that full time for three years and part-time since then and loved it.

Q: Right, it must be rewarding.

A: Yes it is, very much so. I tell people, and I get some odd looks when I say this, but when he's sick or he falls or something like that, or he wakes up at night and is sick, you know, he wants his papa not his mama, and that makes your heart swell very much.

Q: Yes, that's really cool. And so from there, how did you get involved with the River line?

A: Well, let's see, staying home with Ambrose was just wonderful. I wish more men would do it. There's a little stigma to it, but again that created problems with me and my dad, you know, now you've got a college degree, spent all this money on college, and

now you're staying at home taking care of a little boy, you know, what's going on. But I actually, I stayed at home. I mean I stayed at home, home. You know, I did the groceries, that sort of stuff. That was my big day out, going to get groceries. I know what the women went through in the sixties now. The isolation was incredible. I didn't know what day of the week it was. Sometimes I didn't even know what month it was. I said, you know what, I got to do something part time just to get out and have some interaction with some adults.

So I went looking on the Internet and The Natural Resources Council of Maine had an ad on there for someone working part time to cover whatever. Sometimes it was covering the front desk, sometimes it was doing reports, sometimes it was just an odds and ends sort of thing. And I called them up, told them who I was, that I had graduated from Unity with a environmental policy degree, I was looking for something just part time. It was not to make money to eat with, it was to get out and communicate with other people. And they said, boy, you sound like a great fit, why don't you come in. And they hired me on the spot.

And I did that for a couple of years and then I met Naomi (*unintelligible*) who was executive director of Maine Rivers, who was in that same office building, and she found out where I was from and my history with the river and said, if you really want to be part of this organization, we'll try and get started down there.

So I've been involved with Androscoggin River Alliance since even before it was the Androscoggin River Alliance. I was one of those that was trying to figure out what we were going to call it, and then when we got some serious funding to hire someone half time they just said, this is your job, so here it is.

Q: From working with them, E/PRO and Central Maine Power and doing water quality sampling, did you ever feel pulled to do that kind of work at all?

A: Oh, it was great, because what they did was they gave me a week's worth of sampling bottles, a boat, a truck, and said we'll see you in the fall. I spent three days a week out on the river and then I'd spend a day – it was a part time job – and I'd spend one day doing reports and that sort of stuff. But most of the time was just spent right on the river. It was grand, you know. I really didn't report to anyone. I just told them, yes, the samples got collected and they were given to the state lab. That's all they wanted to know. So it really was a grand job, but I liked the political science end of things, not the real science end of things, so I guess part of what intrigued me so much was the Androscoggin, the river that I grew up beside, and that sort of stuff.

Q: So had you ever thought of doing any sort of political science, environmental policy end of things with the Androscoggin before Naomi approached you?

A: No. There the time wasn't right, it was only the Androscoggin. So no, no. I remember seeing really nasty stuff there as a kid, particularly when I was going to junior high, it was particularly bad. Rode a bus over it every day and it was just God awful. And I remember even as a child that my mom had some family friends that had a house right beside the river and we'd go there, because we grew up at Allen Pond, we were very good swimmers. And my mom would tell us whenever we went there *(unintelligible)*, don't you go near that river, don't you go near that river. And we always asked her, well, we're good swimmers, don't worry about it. And she said, it's not about you guys swimming. That's not a good place to go. It's polluted and you'll get sick. Just stay away from that river. I remember that from when I was very little.

And then right around '68 or '69, it was always a tradition at my house at suppertime – you ate supper at five o'clock – the nightly news came on at six o'clock, and from six to seven you watched the news. That was just the way it was. And I remember seeing I think it was the Cayuga River in Ohio, about '68, and the river burnt. And that's all they showed on the national news for several days, because here's this river and it's burning. You know, how can a river burn? It's water. So that really intrigued me.

And right about that same time this big green tank showed up on the side of the road beside the Gagne's house, and I said to my mom and dad, what's that big tank thing, what's that all about? And they said, oh that's the pump box turning into the river to

keep the fish alive. And I said wow. So it dawned on me that rivers aren't supposed to look and be treated the way that was.

And just before that, it was very funny because I'm just actually beginning to tell this story because I was kind of ashamed of it for years, because we were at Allen Pond, and people had camps there. We had some very dear friends of ours who have since moved to Maine, but they used to live in Rhode Island and they would come up here for the summers. He was a high school teacher and now teaches high school, I think, last I knew at Greely High School, and we'd go down there once in a while for spring vacation or something like that and spend a week with them.

Well, we went down there and these kids befriended – this was my oldest brother and my sister and I – we'd go down. Some local kids befriended us and they would always brag about all the great stuff that was going on in Rhode Island and all the great stuff that was happening. I remember this one day I had had just about enough and I said to them, but you know what, the fifth most polluted river runs through our town, you know? That just stuck in my head. I had heard that was the fifth most polluted river in the country, and here it is running right through our town, so I had to tell them that the fifth most polluted river in the country runs through our town, thinking that's something big, you know?

Q: Yeah, a national statistic.

A: Yeah, so I remember early on, very early on, how nasty that river was, even as not much more than a toddler, I knew how nasty that river was.

Q: Do you have any specific memories of the smell?

A: Oh, I remember days driving across that bridge in the school bus and there would be these – this is the only word I've ever been able to come up with – these gobs of mostly brown, but sometimes you'd see different colors, foam coming down the river that would be about a foot thick above the water, as big as this room. And it would be all over. It wouldn't just be one thing, just the whole river would be covered with these floating globs of foam, and covering the foam would be dead fish.

And some days, I remember some days when I was a very little boy, particularly in the early spring when it was just starting getting warm, I remember it really stinking. I don't know for sure because I was too young to remember, but I'm pretty sure now that those were probably days that there were big fish kills. Because it wasn't like the usual smell you could smell, it was like God awful rotten smell, and I think there were big fish kills that day. So yeah, I remember some nasty stuff there.

Q: You've mentioned before talking to your dad recently about his memory. Could you tell me a little bit about that?

A: Well, his memories are that there are no memories of the river. He grew up at a farm in Durham, literally right on the riverbank. We have a picture of my grandparents' place and you can see the river out the back, and that's where he grew up until he moved to Allen Pond. And he doesn't remember other than knowing that that was a nasty, awful place, and that it stank and that sort of stuff. That's what he remembers with the river. It wasn't like, you'd think when a little kid grows up beside the river they're going to have memories of fishing down there and exploring the river bank. No, none of that. The one memory he has is that my great grandfather, his grandfather, would tell him stories of catching salmon there when he was a little boy, when my great grandfather was a little boy, he'd catch salmon there, and that's the memory that my dad has.

Q: So skipping ahead a little bit again, how did it feel to begin doing the work with the River Alliance?

A: Let's see, I need to say this very politically correct. It was different in the very beginning. There was this group that formed. I was there at every meeting, but I was like an outsider outside of the group. There was this little, you know, I wouldn't call it a clique, but there was a little group that had formed and when I would suggest something at a meeting it wouldn't go anywhere. It was difficult to break into that little group. And most of that group, I don't say this in a negative way, it probably comes across that way,

but I'm from away, not people that grew up here. People that grew up elsewhere who had nice educations and had nice jobs in the past and either came here as very successful professionals or to retire or, you know.

But there was another gentleman who still from time to time participates with us who grew up in Auburn, about the same age as I am. He feels the exact same thing, when ARA first started, before it was ARA there was this – at least we had the feeling, but this is not even true – but we had the feeling we were just seen as just the local folks and don't really have much to say or much input to give.

Q: But that seems like something you're working totally against at the moment.

A: Oh, absolutely.

Q: Or for, however you say that.

A: Well, you know, I think that's why he kind of drifted away. Myself, you know, that's my river. I grew up beside it, my dad grew up beside it, my wife grew up beside it, and my grandfather. It's my river and no one's going to tell me that I don't have something to say about it. I actually had words with several members along that same line. And that's when things began to change a little bit. I began to see that, oh, okay, now they're beginning to listen to me, particularly when it came to outreach. They could

reach out to the professionals but they couldn't reach out to the people coming out of the shops. They just didn't have that.

Q: Where did such a strong 'my river' sentiment come from? It's almost like a reaction to how they were talking, or was that something -?

A: I think part of it, because I remember as that little boy realizing that things weren't good and putting up with it all those years, never having access to it. And then when I became a parent, I want my son to be able to do that, and by God, somebody from away is not going to tell me that I don't have something to say about it. I kind of feel jilted that my great grandfather, my father, or my grandfather or my father, didn't say, you know, they had to have seen what was happening to that river and realize that, geez, we can't catch salmon there anymore. Well I would have stood up and been screaming bloody murder. But they didn't, you know. And our generations are paying for that. So I think that's where that comes from. It is my river, my family's river.

Q: I know that you said you had talked to your dad about that. Do you think that maybe he's seeing that?

A: Maybe. Maybe. I don't know.

Q: All right, just wondering where that came from all of a sudden. You don't know, right? And if you could speak to the future, what would be the most important things that you would see?

A: What would I like to see happen to the river?

Q: Yes.

A: Boy, that's very difficult. Because on one hand I have that Yankee work ethic that says we need jobs so I don't want something to happen to those mills. I think it's inevitable. Deep down inside I think it's inevitable that those mills are going to go away, and I feel bad for those communities that are going to be really devastated. And it's going to take them probably longer than Lewiston-Auburn to come back after the loss of the textile mills and shoe shops, because we're the second largest metropolitan area in the state. We had to get something sooner or later. Something had to get going.

But if you're talking Rumford or Livermore, there's nothing there. Without those mills, there's even less there, and there's nothing to draw in any other source of employment. So I think what's going to happen is probably those will become virtually ghost towns, because people will have to move away to get jobs. On the other hand I think, boy, that would be really nice for my river. You know, I think about John Roiter, our intern from last summer, and him coming from Bethel and them having this grand, beautiful water in

the Androscoggin that you can go swimming in, you can catch some fish. Boy, I'd love to be able to have that down here, at least for my son.

I question whether or not it's going to be safe even for my son, because of the legacy of pollution that's there now, but maybe my grandchildren will still be able to do that. And maybe with a cleaner river there will be economic stability in the Lewiston-Auburn area so that maybe my grand kids will be able to stay here. You know, I talked about my brothers and sisters – my brother and my sister – we were the lost generation, and we went through all the economic hard times without finding jobs. But what is really tough about that is, I have nephews and nieces that are old enough now, they aren't here, they're gone. They said there's no way we're coming back. So it's kind of a loss of multiple generations. So I'm hoping that because Ambrose is so young, maybe there'll be time for things to get corrected and maybe my grand kids will still find this place a nice place to live.

Q: I know when I was up in the Berlin area they were talking a lot about recreation and trying to turn that aspect around. Do you see that as an important part of the future?

A: Oh, clearly that's very important, but there's a battle to be fought there too. One of the people that was involved in starting the Androscoggin River Alliance is a very large farmer in Turner. He's from away, came with a lot of money, bought up a bunch of

farms, as they were going broke basically. He bought them up and now he has this very huge, successful farm which, you know, I don't hold against him. Good for him. But I heard him say over and over again as we were starting this process, I don't want to clean this river up so I see a bunch of boaters out there every day. Well, who are we cleaning it up for? Just for him? I don't think so, at least that's not my intention. My intention is to clean it up for the people and families who have been here for years, putting up with the God awful crap that was there, you know, who didn't get to use it, who didn't get to go swimming in it, who didn't get to go fishing there with their parents or their grandparents, you know? That's who I'm working for. But he sees it totally different. He sees that as pollution is almost a good thing because it's kept everybody away from his river.

Q: Yes, I've heard that in sort of the land conservation aspect too, you know, because it was so dirty, people aren't living along it. But you said you've seen Leeds change a lot.

A: Not so much Leeds. Greene, where I grew up. When I grew up there I knew literally everybody. If I didn't know them by name, I knew they were so-and-so's grandfather or, you know. Now I don't know hardly anybody in that town. The farms that used to be virtually all agricultural, there's one working farm there and that's across the street from me. All the other farms, their crop has been residential development, residential houses, on two-acre lots, and that's two of the farms.

My brother and I had a friend growing up, Jimmy Smith, that had a big, beautiful farm out on the river. We used to go over there and run through the barns and that sort of stuff. That's not a working farm anymore and all those fields that we used to run through before they hayed it, you know, and hide and that sort of stuff in the fields, are all house lots now for big mansions. And just as close to the river as they can get. That sort of stuff.

So it's going to be very crucial for us to create a long term plan for the river, not just to clean it up, because just to clean it up is going to pollute it in another way and it's just going to be house lot, house lot, house lot, along that river. People from away want to come up here and get their nice little piece of Maine. We need to protect that scenic waterway as it is, because of the pollution that was there. It's almost natural in appearance, and that's what we need to protect.

And we would like to work with the land trust and municipalities and whoever will listen to us to come up with some sort of major plan for the river, to protect the corridor and to protect the aesthetics of it. You know, when I was up there sampling on the river, you'd see one or two houses here and there, but for the most part it seemed like you were right out in the wilderness somewhere. You'd see this eagle swoop down and catch a fish. That's just a remarkable place. That won't be the case if we allow it just to go into two acre house lots. It won't be that place any longer, and that's what we need to protect too.

Q: And through your work, how have people reacted to this? I know you said there has been some tension within your family, but within people that you're working with or people in the area, how do they feel? Have you seen that?

A: Well, I think it goes back to the whole economics of the area. We've been so hungry for employment, for jobs, for so long, that we're almost willing to do anything to have it. But some of us aren't willing to have it at the expense of the river. Not any more. So I think most people, just talking to everyday folks in Lewiston-Auburn, most people are very concerned that the river get cleaned up. But they're also concerned that they have access to it and that the fish that are supposed to be there get to come back there, but that we do it in a way that, hey, it might offer some opportunities in employment itself. You know, fly fishing tours, canoe rentals. Recreation based economy along the river is very important, I think. But you've got to be very mindful that you don't overdo and undo all the goodness that we've done.

Q: A whole different kind of fish reuse issue.

A: Yes, yes. But I think most people feel that way. Particularly since we lost the shoe shops and the textile mills, the older generation is even coming around to understand that, yeah, those were good jobs and we lost the river at that expense, but we don't have those anymore and we have to do something different, and part of that

comes out of the river. Wouldn't that be grand? So I don't think other than those people who already own river frontage who want to protect that river frontage from everybody else, I don't see a huge battle there other than finding a way to do it in a sensible manner.

Q: Well, I think that's pretty much what I had for questions. Is there anything else that I skipped over that you're burning to tell me, or any other thoughts?

A: I don't think so, other than my father-in-law offered us a nice, beautiful parcel on the river when we first got married, part of their farm. They had a pick-your-own right there on the river, and we said no, partly because, you know, when you're young you have to do everything on your own, you don't want handouts, and partly because it's the Androscoggin. But then it was the Androscoggin. I'm not sure if that piece was offered to me today if I would turn it down or not. I would have to think about that. Even if I did accept it, I'm not sure what I would do with it.

Q: What do you mean?

A: Well, I don't know if I would just keep it in its wild state or if I would put a house on it or if I would put what Mainers would consider a camp on it, you know. That's probably what I would do, just to show everybody up. Somebody wants to camp there.

But my father-in-law has sold all of that property off, so I won't have that opportunity.

But I kind of wish I had that opportunity again, to at least think about that.

Q: Exactly. Who did he end up selling it off to?

A: It was actually a minister of a local church who came in from Massachusetts, I believe, who had lots of money, who bought the farm and bought up all the river frontage. And the only other thing I would say is that we had some concerns because my father-in-law irrigated from the river, his vegetable garden, for years.

Q: Interesting.

A: Yes. And my wife and I thought about this and we actually didn't talk about it until a couple of years ago. We both had this thought when we found out we were going to have a baby. Of course, you know my wife was going to breast feed, and it's like geez, what did eating those vegetables all those years that were irrigated from the Androscoggin do to my wife and could that be passed on to my son? Like I said, we didn't talk about that until a couple of years ago and I mentioned it to her. I forget how the conversation came up but she said, you know, I had that same thought. And she said, well why didn't you say something to me? The only reply I had to her was, some things you just don't want to know, and she felt the same way. She just doesn't want to

know what that could have done. Maybe it did nothing, but that thought was there. You know, there may have done something.

Q: Pretty intense.

A: Yeah, but like I said, she felt the same way. Some things you just don't want to know.

Q: Yeah, right, exactly. Live and let live, sort of.

A: Yes.

Q: That does it.

A: That does it, except for my son loves the Androscoggin. He just loves the Androscoggin. You say anything about the river, oh, the Androscoggin, he's going to have a much different relationship with that river than I did. So that ends it.

Q: Well, thank you.

End of Interview

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